Trains cross the Korean border for the first time in six decades

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Two trains made short, symbolic trips across the heavily militarised border between South and North Korea last week, in what was acclaimed as a step toward reconciliation on the Korean Peninsula.

Train services between north and south ended during the Korean War in 1951. No formal peace treaty was signed after the 1953 ceasefire, leaving hundreds of thousands of Korean families divided and the two Koreas still technically at war. On one side of the so-called "de-militarised zone," North Korea stations 1.1 million soldiers; on the other, South Korea and the US have 700,000 troops.

Lee Jae-joung, South Korea's unification minister, hailed the rail link as "the reconnection of our national blood vessels and an end to our history of national division". The trips were, however, just test runs on two short, 25-kilometre lines—one on the west coast from Munsan to Kaesong, and the second in the east from Kumgang to Jejin.

South Korea appears to have been far more enthusiastic than North Korea, which sent only half of the promised 100 delegates on each train. More than a thousand people attended celebrations in South Korea to mark the event. No major ceremonies took place in North Korea.

South Korea's *Chosun Ilbo* contrasted the two sides. "Toy guns spewed colourful paper tape and white balloons floated into sky when the train left Munsan. Many had come to wave at the train from the side of the tracks or overpasses. Young people took pictures with their camera phones, and some flashed a thumbs-up in the direction of the train...

"On the North Korea side, by contrast, small clusters of people merely watched the train pass. Nobody waved. The only welcoming event was held when the train arrived at Kaesong Station, where about 100 ninth graders from Seonjuk Middle School shouted the slogan 'Reunification of the Fatherland!' lining both sides of the station."

In South Korea, there were mixed reactions to the rail link. For many it held out the prospect of a formal end to the war and the division of the peninsula. Yim Hee-jae, 82, described to the *Korea Herald* her feelings after watching on TV the trains departing for North Korea: "It's so emotional to see the train go to the North now after all those years since such a tragic war that I don't dare to remind myself."

However, the conservative opposition Grand National Party, which is hostile to any concessions to North Korea, was critical of the train trips, saying they "could work against the international community's coordinated peace efforts". Right-wing protesters demonstrated against the trial runs.

For South Korean President Roh Moo-hyun, who is seeking to boost his Uri party before presidential elections in December, it was a chance to reaffirm his support for the so-called Sunshine policy of reunification. Roh was elected in 2003 after promising to continue the Sunshine policy and assert more independence from Washington. His popularity declined sharply as his administration continued the program of "market reform" and provided South Korean troops for the US occupation of Iraq.

The South Korean business elite regards the Sunshine policy as a means for opening up North Korea as a source of cheap, disciplined labour and ultimately as a gateway to the rest of Asia and Europe. It is estimated that Seoul spent 545.4 billion won or $US586 million to repair the rail tracks and related facilities on both sides of the border to enable the two short trips. A much bigger investment will be required to completely reintegrate North Korea's crumbling rail network with that in South Korea and other countries.

The reestablishment of rail services was first mooted in 2000 at the high point of the Sunshine policy. Amid great fanfare, former South Korean President Kim Dae-jung,

who won the Nobel Peace Prize for his promotion of reunification, visited Pyongyang and met North Korean leader Kim Jong-il. An agreement to reconnect the cross-border rail services was just one of a number of promises aimed at providing South Korean businesses access to a North Korean workforce.

However, the election of US President Bush in 2000 cast an immediate pall over the Sunshine policy. The new administration immediately ended all contact with Pyongyang, pending a lengthy policy review, and in early 2002 branded North Korea as part of an "axis of evil" with Iraq and Iran. In October 2002, Washington accused Pyongyang of having a secret uranium enrichment program, producing a rapidly escalating confrontation and sharp tensions on the Korean peninsula.

Plans for the rail linkage inevitably suffered. Construction commenced in 2002 and the track laying was completed in 2003, at a high point of US pressure on North Korea. Only South Korea marked the occasion with a ceremony. In 2004, the two Koreas agreed to carry out an annual trial train trip, which have failed to take place as the North Korean military refused to guarantee safe passage. Pyongyang reportedly expressed concern that these rail journeys would expose its defence installations and undermine security.

North Korea only agreed to the train trips after the US took steps late last year toward ending the nuclear confrontation—temporarily at least. An agreement was reached at six-party talks—the two Koreas, the US, China, Japan and Russia—in February for Pyongyang to shut down and eventually dismantle its nuclear programs in return for fuel and other assistance as well as the normalisation of diplomatic and economic relations. Implementation remains stalled over the unfreezing and transfer of North Korean funds in the Macau-based Banco Delta Asia.

South Korea has seized the opportunity, however, to encourage North Korea to open up its economy. Seoul has offered an incentive of more than $US80 million in aid to North Korea's light industries, as well as agreeing to provide 400,000 tonnes of rice. The train trips are the most visible sign of thawing relations.

South Korea's short-term aim is to use the two railway lines to transport raw materials and personnel to North Korea's Kaesong industrial zone, where South Korean companies are setting up operations. Seoul also wants 6,000 South Koreans a month to be able to travel to North Korea's tourist resort at Mount Kumgang. Although no timetable has been set, North Korea has agreed in principle to allow regular train services.

The inter-Korean railway is at the heart of President Roh's ambitious project of building an "Iron Silk Road". He recently wrote to Russian President Vladimir Putin proposing a "Three-Party Big Deal" to link South Korea's rail lines with Russia's Trans-Siberia Railway via North Korea. South Korea and Japan are also discussing the construction of a massive undersea tunnel that would connect the Japanese rail network to the same system. Such a plan opens up the possibility of cheap, fast transport of people and goods between North East Asia, including China, and Europe.

As early as 2001, Moscow expressed interest in a rail link through North Korea to ship oil and gas to East Asian markets, but Washington's standoff with Pyongyang effectively stymied the plan. Following the six-party agreement, Russia revived the plan and signed a memorandum of understanding with Pyongyang to build a rail freight terminal at the North Korean port city of Najin.

The revival of these economic plans points to the real motives behind the Bush administration's bellicose stance toward North Korea: it has been a convenient means for undermining the Sunshine policy, which held out the prospect of closer economic cooperation between its European and Asian rivals. By threatening North Korea, Washington was able to continue to dictate terms in North East Asia and to continue to justify maintaining military forces in the region.

Bogged down in disastrous wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, the Bush administration has chosen to ease tensions in North East Asia. At the same time, if the US faces the prospect of being eclipsed by its rivals in this economically crucial region, Washington could rapidly ditch the February agreement and revert to a policy of open confrontation.

Either way, the fate of the inter-Korean rail link is a significant litmus test of international relations in the region. The fact that it has taken seven years to conduct two short, symbolic train journeys is an indication that very little has been resolved.